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PRESS RELEASE

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Army theatre helps Soldiers deal with 'private wars'

By Tim Hipps
USACFSC Public Affairs

FORT BELVOIR, Va. – The cast of BRAVO! Army Theatre Touring Company's "Pvt. Wars" recently visited Walter Reed Army Medical Center to better understand the emotional issues of Soldiers recovering from injuries sustained in the War on Terrorism.

Many of the "private wars" portrayed in the play, which revolves around the physical and psychological recoveries of three injured Vietnam War veterans, apply to Soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, said Tobin Atkinson, director of BRAVO!'s "Pvt. Wars" by James McLure.

"It's a really good play in the sense that these Soldiers are going to come back with issues," Atkinson said of the play being delivered to Soldiers and military families on installations in Maryland, Virginia, Georgia, Kentucky, Germany, Sarajevo, Kosovo, Belgium, Wisconsin and Chicago. "Soldiers who come back from Iraq are going to have a bit of baggage. Some guys are going to be able to leave it at the door and move on with their lives, and some aren't. They're going to be addressing those things personally.

"A lot of men and women who are rolling out are worried before they go over, and that's also a private war that they are facing: 'Will I do the right thing when I get over there? Will I be the Soldier that I want to be? Have I been trained enough? Do I have the right equipment?'"

Cast member Sgt. 1st Class Robert Isom, a drill sergeant stationed at Fort Jackson, S.C., knows first-hand what many Soldiers are experiencing.

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“I am a veteran of Desert Shield and Desert Storm, so this particular play definitely hits home with me,” Isom said. “There always are going to be wars, and we’re Soldiers, and that’s what we do. You’re going to have private issues that you don’t want to talk about but you can talk about. That’s something not everybody understands – that it’s OK to feel that way.

“This play is about three guys with totally different issues. These guys, despite their differences, find something in common and it brings them together. I think that’s the beauty of the military taking it on the road to bring them together to build one corps.”

BRAVO! is an all-Soldier touring theatrical company that performs on military installations throughout the world, delivering arts to Soldiers, family members and civilians. Admission is free for this PG-13-rated drama intended for mature audiences.

Composed of a series of brief blackout scenes, the play blends them into a mosaic as the three actors tease, torment, entertain, exasperate and, on occasion, give solace to each other – maintaining throughout a sense of humor that belies their deep concern about the uncertainties of the civilian world to which they soon will be returning, according to the playbill for “Pvt. Wars.”

“What’s difficult to pull off is that the play has comedy and dramatic elements,” said cast member Sgt. Michael Malizia, a native of Stamford, Conn., stationed in Bamberg, Germany. “The balancing part is making comedy out of a very serious situation. You don’t want to cross the line. These guys have bad injuries and they have bad memories, and each one of them is dealing with it in their own way.

“Sometimes you get outbursts, just like you do in the war we’re dealing with now. Because this play takes place in the Vietnam War, it kind of transcends those thoughts – to adjust, to be accepted, and to move forward. That’s what this whole play is about, moving forward, but they can’t do it. They can leave anytime they want to, but they don’t, and they’re trying to find out why within themselves. Those are their private wars.”

Cast member Sgt. Eric Bragg of Fort Detrick, Md., said he thinks the timing is perfect to deliver “Pvt. Wars” to military families.

“When everything’s said and done and everybody comes home, everyone thinks they’re alright,” he said. “But battles are still raging on inside of us because we’re not a generation that has known war, so I think this does speak to 18- to 25-year-old Soldiers who are coming back now.”

The original play was set in 1972-73 when the World Trade Center was being dedicated in New York. Nearly three decades later, terrorists knocked the twin towers to the ground, igniting the current war on terror.

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“We’ve came full-circle and yet the circle is still turning,” Atkinson said. “Soldiers are part of our community and just taking a yellow sticker and putting it on your car that says: “Support Our Troops,” that’s nice, but I don’t know if it’s enough.

“I think the humor [in this play] is really therapeutic. These talented actors are certainly going to take the audience on a journey. This play is about Soldiers and family – these three guys are all they have. It’s much like modern-day Walter Reed Army Medical [Center].”

The prior on-stage experience of these three actors is unprecedented in Army Entertainment plays, Atkinson said.

Bragg has been acting for 10 years. His resume includes roles in “Guys and Dolls,” “I Hate Hamlet,” “A Streetcar Named Desire,” “Hello, Dolly!,” “The Goodbye Girl,” and “A Murder Mystery Who Dunnit? A Rock-n-Roll Golden Oldies Murder,” most of which he performed at Way Off Broadway, a dinner theatre in Frederick, Md.

Bragg said he learned about the Army Entertainment Division before enlisting.

“I came in specifically knowing that this was here and that I was going for it,” he said. “I told my recruiter what I do and he told me about this program. If I wasn’t here, I’d be doing theatre somewhere else.”

Malizia, a multiple launch rocket systems crewmember who returned from Iraq in March and did a six-month tour in Kosovo in 2002, performed at Casa Manana in Fort Worth, Texas, where he received an associate’s degree from the Actors Conservatory of the Southwest and taught theatre to grade-school children. He’s had roles in “The Swan,” “The Elephant Man” and “Search and Destroy.”

Isom has spent most of the past 10 years in Georgia, where he worked with Augusta Mini Theatre and attended Macon State College to study theatre and communications. He, too, has taught theatre in elementary schools.

“The three people that we got are very talented, very experienced, and their commands are very supportive,” Atkinson said. “They already have a language about the theatre so we can do theatre games where they’re much more open to explore their characters very early on, so we’re much further along than other shows that I’ve done.”

The Soldier-actors, in turn, say they are fortunate to have Atkinson as their director.

“Tobin is fun to work with,” Malizia said. “He allows us space to discover the characters. He knows what looks good and he knows what the feeling of the piece is.”

4/4/4

Their next mission is to help Soldiers and military families deal with the emotions of real-life private wars.

“This is our job right now,” Malizia said. “We plan to give something back, and, hopefully, they’ll take something away from it.”